2: Fortes E-5 (1934-1937) 1945
FE11 Tallensi FE11

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

The Natural Environment of the Tallensi

THE Northern Territories of the Gold Coast lie entirely within the Sudanese Zone.[1] It has been variously described as 'parkland', 'savannah', or 'orchard bush' country, terms which indicate the sparse and uniform forestation characteristic of this zone. Stretching irregularly and almost right across Africa, between the eighth and the sixteenth parallels N. latitude, it merges into the Sahara on the north and is bounded by the tropical rain forest on the south.

The traveller in West Africa who enters this region from the south is impressed by the contrast with the forest belt. According to his predilections he will view it with pleasure or dismay after the massive and gigantic gloom of the forest. Here are no great trees a hundred or two hundred feet high rooted amid thick undergrowth and enveloped in tenacious creepers. The orchard bush country is a vast plain, in some parts monotonously flat, in others gently undulating and diversified by an occasional range of hills or a steep scarp. The tracts of bush, sometimes fairly extensive, which may be encountered in the less populated areas, resemble the secondary forestation of abandoned cultivations in the rain forest. Scattered trees, no larger than our oaks and beeches, man-high grass, and scrub constitute these patches of standing bush. In the dry season the landscape appears harsh and bare, and its general drab hue is hardly relieved by the shade trees in front of the native homesteads or the remnants of vegetation along the dry watercourses. The mud walls and thatched roofs of the homesteads seem to blend indistinguishably with the dusty country-side. In the middle of the wet season, when every footpath becomes a rivulet and every depression a bog, the homesteads are hidden behind ramparts of luxuriant grain, and the whole country-side is resplendent with the green of flourishing vegetation.

The climate of the Sudanese Zone exhibits two clearly defined seasons, a dry season lasting about half the year (October to March) and a wet season lasting the remaining six or seven months (April to October). Not only are there marked variations in the mean rainfall from one area

[1] For a short account of the principal ecological and climatic features of the part of the Sudanese Zone that concerns us in this book, see Lynn, C. W., *Agriculture in North Mamprussi*, Bulletin No. 34 of the Gold Coast Department of Agriculture, 1937. Climate and vegetation are more fully discussed in Bégué, L., *Contribution à l'Étude de la Végétation Forestière de la Haute Côte d'Ivoire*, Publications du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, 1937. These writers give lists of the common trees of economic value found in our area, of which the following are the best known and most frequently seen in inhabited places: Shea (*Butyrospermum parkii*); locust bean (*Parkia filicoidea*); baobab (*Adansonia digitata*); various species of acacia; the silk cotton (*Ceiba pentendra*); the tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*).

[p. 1]

2: Fortes E-5 (1934-1937) 1945
FE11 Tallensi FE11

132 to another, ranging from 25 inches to 45 inches per annum, but fluctuations occur from year to year in the same area. Erratic or abnormal rains may so disturb the cycle of food production as to subject a majority of the population to severe privation. The temperature in the vicinity of 10° 30′ N. latitude and 0° 30′ W. longitude varies from a minimum of about 70° F. to a maximum of about 93° F. A characteristic feature of the dry season is the harmattan, a hot parching wind laden with fine dust which blows from the Sahara, so strongly at times as to obscure the landscape in a haze which limits visibility to a few hundred yards. Heavy dew and mists cause the mornings to be chilly and bracing, so much so that the natives squat shivering round fires or remain indoors until the sun is high; from the forenoon until about 4 p.m. the sun blazes relentlessly through the faint haze; sunset ushers in a cool and balmy evening; and night brings a relatively marked drop in temperature. Violent nocturnal tornadoes from the east and north-east, accompanied by lightning and thunder, introduce the rainy season, during which the prevailing wind blows from the direction of the Gulf of Guinea, to the south and south-east. During this season the temperature remains fairly stable throughout the day. Though it is never as hot as in the hottest days of the dry season, the humidity makes it at times excessively oppressive. The peak of the rains comes in August–September. It rains so heavily then that many social activities are impeded. These conditions of vegetation and climate fundamentally influence the economy and the social life of the inhabitants of the Sudanese Zone.

[101] This book is concerned with the population of a very small section of
131 the Sudanese Zone, a part of the region drained by the Volta river system.
133 The head-waters of this system lie in French West Africa. About 20 miles south of the international boundary between the Gold Coast and French Ivory Coast, which has been arbitrarily fixed to coincide approximately with the eleventh parallel N. latitude, the Red Volta flows into the White Volta. Between these two rivers, on the east and south respectively, and the Sissili river on the west lies an area, arbitrarily truncated on the north by the international boundary, comprising two of the most heavily populated administrative districts of the Gold Coast. The eastern third of this area constitutes the administrative district of Zuarungu, the remaining two-thirds the district of Navrongo. The Red Volta separates Zuarungu district from another administrative unit, Kusasi, and the White Volta forms a natural boundary between it and the Mamprusi district, to the south of which lies the territory of the Dagomba.

161 As the following table[1] from the census of 1931 shows, the Zuarungu
134 district is the most densely populated part of this area; and as the popula-
137 tion tends to be concentrated in the centre and north, the actual density of settlement exceeds the figures given. In some localities this is reflected

[1] See *Appendices containing Comparative Returns and General Statistics of the 1931 Census*, Gold Coast, 1932, p. 3; and Cardinall, A. W., *The Gold Coast*, 1931, Population Map, p. 156. Mr. Cardinall remarks (p. 123) that 'A majority of the census officers were of opinion that the figures collected by them are lower than they should have been by from 2 per cent. to 10 per cent.'—a contingency inevitable in a country which is for the most part still pre-literate.

2: Fortes E-5 (1934-1937) 1945
FE11 Tallensi FE11

in serious soil erosion due to over-cultivation and in the diminution of uncultivated bush land, so that firewood and other sylvan products cannot be found within six or more miles of the settlements.

District	*Area*	*Population*	*Density per sq. mile*
Navrongo . .	1,551	120,870	77·96
Zuarungu . .	781	133,981	171·55
Kusaasi* . .	1,227	151,715	123·64
Mamprusi* .	2,719	61,520	22·62
Dagomba*. .	12,257	191,956	15·66

* Partly in Mandated Territory of Togoland.

In spite of the general similarity of climate and vegetation in the Sudanese Zone, local variations produce significant ecological differences. This is shown in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast by the differences in agriculture north and south of the Gambaga scarp. The steep scarp marks both a geological and an ecological line of division. South of it the rock formations are of sandstone and shale, north of it granite, quartz, and greenstone predominate. South of the scarp a form of shifting cultivation is customary, and yams (*Dioscorea* spp.) are grown on a large scale side by side with millet (*Pennisetum typhoides*, var.), guinea corn (*Sorghum vulgare*), and maize (*Zea mays*). North of it yams will not grow easily and cereal crops form the staple food supply.[1]

The relative scarcity of population in the yam-growing districts compared with the congested areas north of the White Volta may be due to unknown historical and cultural factors, but endemic diseases have undoubtedly impeded population growth. While malaria, yaws, and leprosy, to mention only the commonest enemies of native health, are widespread throughout the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, sleeping-sickness is also endemic throughout the Mamprusi and Dagomba districts. In the central sectors north of the scarp sleeping-sickness occurs only sporadically near the rivers.

Topographical differences also appear to influence the distribution of population. The high plateau which stretches from the White Volta northwards is more suited for permanent habitation than the low-lying flats which make up the greater part of Mamprusi and Dagomba. In the wet season they turn into quagmires, in the dry season they are arid tracts seriously short of water-supplies. North of the White Volta numerous streams and small rivers combine with the relatively greater elevation to drain the plateau effectively during the heavy rains; and though surface water becomes scarce in the dry season, shallow pits generally provide sufficient water for normal needs.

The district of Zuarungu is a typical portion of the Trans-Volta plateau. A number of bouldery hills from 100 to 500 feet high are scattered over its undulating surface. The most conspicuous are the Tong Hills, a small range stretching for about four miles just north of the river. It adds an

[1] Cf. Fortes, M. and S. L., 'Food in the Domestic Economy of the Tallensi', *Africa*, ix. 2, 1936; and Lynn, C. W., op. cit.

2: Fortes E-5 (1934-1937) 1945
FE11 Tallensi FE11

and the Earth when representatives of the various clans gather to perform one of the great annual ceremonies, as their ritual obligations compel them to, even though they are nowadays divided into two hostile camps. For these are the occasions when the essential unity of Tenzugu—a unity in relation to which the six clans rank merely as *yizugɔt*—can rightly be insisted upon, when frank reproaches verging on warnings of spiritual retribution can be directed against the destroyers of this unity.

Yet in other situations the component maximal lineages of a particular Tenzugu clan are referred to as its *yizugɔt*. Thus, in connexion with their distinct ritual offices in the cult of the External *Bɔyar* or their divergent clanship linkages, the three maximal lineages of Bunkiuk are always described as *yizugɔt*. For, like the clan in relation to its neighbour clans, the maximal lineage forms a distinct genealogical and residential unity within the clan settlement. Looked at from within, each maximal lineage is a relatively autonomous integral unit, the majority of whose members live close together inside its social boundaries, which are defined in relation to the other lineages of the clan in the same way as those of the clan settlement are defined in relation to neighbouring clans. The difference is one of degree only, the social boundaries of a lineage within a clan being more fluid than those of a clan. The stability of a settlement rests on the equilibrium of its sections with one another, and this depends upon their being precisely differentiated from one another.

The Sections of Tongo

Tongo proper (Tɔŋ-Nayiri) has four *yizugɔt*—Puhug, Guŋ, Seug, and Kuorəg. Two roads, laid down some years ago by the Administration, which intersect almost at right angles where the Resthouse stands (see map at end of book), by chance afford a convenient set of co-ordinates for describing its layout. Puhug occupies most of the south-western quadrant and a corner of the south-eastern quadrant, most of which is Kuorəg. Seug is an irregular block in the north-eastern quadrant. Guŋ is divided: part of it, Guŋ proper, lies across the watercourse to the west of Puhug; but the majority of its members live in the north-western quadrant, in a broad wedge between Zubiuŋ and Gbizug known as Dekpieŋ. A few Guŋ homesteads also lie on the border between Seug and Zoo. Nevertheless, scattered as it is, Guŋ constitutes a single *yizug* in all corporate affairs except those connected with modern administrative demands. In the latter the local criterion prevails, Dekpieŋ having its own headman and the Guŋ homesteads at Seug coming under the supervision of the Seug headman. Members of all four sections live at Zoo and at Gbambee, but they always act with their respective sections in matters of common concern.

The names of these sections are typical of section and settlement names all over the country. Puhug gets its name from an ancient *puhug* or *puɔga* (*Tamarindus Indica*) tree, which is said to have stood at the edge of the sacred dancing-ground in the centre of the section from time immemorial. It died long ago, but old men still remember seeing its stump. Guŋ is called after the silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba Pentendra*; Talni, *guŋ*) so common in the country. Trees of all kinds, and especially those as tall as the

2: Fortes E-5 (1934-1937) 1945
FE11 Tallensi FE11

silk-cotton, are prominent landmarks in a country of monotonous plains; hence settlements and sections often bear the names of species of trees found there.

Kuorəg was thus named, according to popular etymology, because the Soog Yikpɛndaana, who holds the ritual jurisdiction over the land on which the homesteads of Kuorəg stand, ritually allocated or 'cut' (*kuo*) the sites for all these homesteads when Tongo men first settled there. In the same way popular etymology explains the name Dekpieŋ ('it is hard') as derived from the hardness (*kpeoŋ*) of the soil in that part of the settlement as compared with that of Puhug or Seug. Seug literally means 'the rainy season', but no one in Tongo was ever able to suggest how this section acquired its name; and this is characteristic of very many settlement and section names in Taleland.

To the people of Tongo their present residential constellation is the visible deposit, as it were, of the continuous expansion of the sub-clan through many generations within the limits of its geographical environment and social boundaries. They read the spatial disposition of the four sections as a record of their structural evolution, as a map of the contemporary constitution, and as proof of the chronological retrospect of the sub-clan. Mosuor came to settle at Puhug, where his grave still marks the site of his homestead. As his posterity increased in numbers, they began to move outwards in the same way as young men migrate to Zoo, Gbambee, and farther, nowadays, and for the same reason, shortage of farm-land. Thus Guŋ, Kuorəg, and Seug were occupied. Later, the descendants of those who founded Guŋ became too numerous for the land available there, and, prevented from expanding into Wakii by the social barriers between Tongo and that clan, filtered gradually into the area that is now Dekpieŋ. Arguing from what may be observed nowadays, they say that this was largely a process of occupying hitherto vacant land at a time when the population was very small. But it was partly, also, a process of dispossessing and pushing out to their present location the people of Zubiuŋ and of Gbizug, who claim to have lived at Puhug originally. In proof of this they cite their myths of origin, the fact that the dancing-ground in Puhug is sacred because it is the site of Tɛndaan Gɛnət's homestead, and the ritual jurisdiction exercised over part of the land of Puhug by Gbizug and over the remainder by Zubiuŋ. Indeed, there are Zubiuŋ graves on land now occupied by Dekpieŋ men which are said to date back only three to five generations. This proves that the people of Zubiuŋ were still yielding ground to the Tɔndɛm, as they themselves admit, when elders alive to-day were 'already born'.

There is nothing derogatory in such a retreat. On the contrary, Gbizug and Zubiuŋ elders boast of it as additional evidence of the dependence of the people of Tongo on their ritual benevolence and bounty. It is a cardinal rule of Tale ethics that a request for land to build on and farm—especially if it comes from a kinsman, friend, or neighbour—may not be refused if it can be granted without hardship. There was formerly, and there still is to a small extent, land to spare at Gbizug and at Zubiuŋ. Tongo people have innumerable ties of kinship and neighbourhood with Gbizug and Zubiuŋ, which are the more effective on account of the ties

2: Fortes E-5 (1934-1937) 1945
FE11 Tallensi FE11

PLATE XI

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(*a*) The grave of Tɛndaan Gɛnɔt and the space believed to have been occupied by his homestead and Mosuor's, now the sacred dancing ground, Giŋgaaŋ Puhug, at Tongo. Note that it is not cultivated.

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(*b*) A miniature homestead symbolizing the ancestral home of a maximal lineage or clan. Note the lineage *boyar* against the outside wall.

[FACING p. 224]

5: Fortes E-5 (1934-1937)1938 FE11 Tallensi FE11

On any day in the dry season or the first half of the rainy season one can find a group of girls playing at housekeeping. Most commonly they consist of a group of sisters and ortho-cousins—two to four active participants with, perhaps, a couple of infants attached. Often one or two small boys of about 5 or 6 are in their company, sharing in their play or absorbed in their own separate play. In play, as in the simple economic duties, there is as yet no marked sex dichotomy at this age; and small boys are not ridiculed for 'grinding grain' and 'cooking porridge', or small girls for 'building houses' in play. The girls generally constitute a mixed age group, varying from 6 to 10–11 years, for even those who are already capable of real cooking enjoy playing at it. When they are of about equal maturity their play tends to be loosely organized. Each cooks for herself, but they help one another, lending one another 'utensils', 'grain', 'firewood', and exchanging 'dishes of porridge' like co-wives. When one girl is older than the others she tends to take the lead, and the smaller girls assist her on the pattern of daughter helping mother in real cooking. Infants are 'our children'; and reliable informants have told me that small boys are said to be the 'husbands'—but I have never observed boys being addressed thus, though I have watched housekeeping play very frequently. According to my observation, it is merely implied in the manner of distributing the 'cooked porridge', which follows the pattern of family feeding. Older girls sometimes introduce dolls as the 'children'—clay figures of people made by themselves or, more usually, for them by their brothers.

The essentials of the play consist in 'grinding flour', 'cooking sauce' and 'porridge', and 'sharing out' the 'food'. Every feature of the real processes is mimicked, but with the most ingenious imaginative adaptations. A pair of flattish stones or a boulder and a large pebble serve as 'grindstones'. For pots, dishes, calabashes, and ladles various things are used—old sherds chipped into roughly circular pieces the size of a half-crown or crown, fragments of old calabashes, the husks, whole or bisected, of *molomok* or *kalampoo*, spherical fruits of common trees varying in size from that of a large marble to that of a cricket ball, and even old tins or bits of tins, while some girls make little pots of clay. Pebbles make a fire-place, a thin piece of millet-stalk is the stirring-stick, some dried grass the firewood.

Isolation.

An important economic feature of the district is its distance from the coast, 500 miles, and from rail head, 350 miles. This means expensive road transport precluding the possibility of all but local exports with the present prices ruling on the world's markets. The isolation is further emphasised by the fact that the main road to the South is not yet all-weather. Motor traffic is cut off from the end of May until the end of November, when the Volta rivers wash away the temporary dry season drifts.

European Contact.

Contact with Europeans has taken place only comparatively recently, *i.e.*, within about the last forty years, and for some time, soldiers, police, and political officers were the only "white men" known to the people; these were followed by medical and veterinary officers. It was not until 1930 that an agricultural officer visited the district in the growing season, and then only temporarily upon locust control duty. Observations made during this visit are recorded in the Department's Year Book for 1930 (4). In 1932 practically new ground had to be broken, and a natural suspicion, increased by not altogether unfounded rumours of direct taxation, had to be overcome before the people's confidence was obtained. The importance of this confidence for the success of our work requires no stressing.

Climate.

The main climatic feature of the district is a well defined rainy season, lasting from the beginning of April until the middle of November, alternating with an intensely dry season. The mean annual rainfall at Zuarungu is 43.92", at Navrongo 47.83", and at Bawku 41.20". Monthly means are given in Appendix I. The whole of North Mamprusi is included in the Sudanese Climatic Zone (5). Rainbearing winds come from the South East, but tornadoes from the East and North East mark the beginning and the end of the rainy season; then precipitations are very localised. From November until February or March the "harmattan" (5) wind blows with varying severity.

Vegetation—Trees.

The natural vegetation of North Mamprusi is "tree savannah" (6) with fringing forest along the banks of the larger rivers. In the populated parts of the district only trees of economic value,

7:Lynn G-5 (1932-1936) 1937 FE11 Tallensi FE11

●137 either as food or medicine, have been allowed to remain. The most important of these are:—

Adansonia digitata	Acacia albida
Butyrospermum parkii	Acacia sieberriana
Parkia filicoidea	Acacia arabica
Diospyros mespiliformis	Cieba pentandra
Sterculia tomentosa	Bombax buonopozense
Ficus gnaphalocarpa	Lannea acida
Tamarindus indica	Sclerocarya birrea
Celtis integrifolia	Vitex cienkowskii

Other trees of less economic value, which have been removed to make way for farming, or to provide firewood and building timbers, can be seen well represented in "ju-ju groves", "tengani" (Nankani), and on the margins of cultivation. The most important of these are:

Combretum spp.	Acacia seyal
Terminalia spp.	Acacia senegal
Anogeissus leiocarpus	Sarcocephalus russegeri
Bauhinia spp.	

Grasses.

All land which is not under cultivation carries a covering of grasses which is usually burnt-over annually, in the dry season. The composition of grass land varies according to soil, situation, and conditions of burning and grazing. Large areas of exposed land carry only a thin cover of Heteropogon contortus. On better soils Pennisetum polystachyon, "chima" (Nankani), is found on roadsides and between farms; it is valued highly as a fodder grass. Other grasses commonly occurring on waste places in cultivated areas are: Dactyloctenium aegyptium, Chloris spp., Aristida ascensionis, and Eragrostis spp. In "bush areas" Adropogon gayanus and Cymbopogon proximus are common.

Topography.

133 241 North and South Mamprusi are separated by a steep escarpment. This is an important dividing line for it marks the change from the standstone and shale rock formations in the South, to granite, quartz, and greenstone formations in the North; it is also roughly the Northern limit of yam cultivation, associated with methods of "shifting" cultivation; and the Southern limit of early